

CHANGING REALITY: THE BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY AND THE CREATION OF A NEW REALITY

Mudando a realidade: a comunidade Bahá'í e a criação de uma nova realidade

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RESUMO

Atualmente é bem aceito pelos cientistas sociais que os seres humanos criam a realidade socialmente e de forma comunal. A cultura ou ponto de vista assim criado é particularmente estável, pois é considerado como aceito e não é usualmente questionado. Este *paper* examina as tentativas que estão sendo realizadas pela comunidade bahá'í através do mundo para mudar esta realidade socialmente criada. Em particular, este paper examina a estrutura social organizada hierarquicamente que tem sido o padrão para os seres humanos desde que iniciamos a viver em cidades. Os ensinamentos bahá'ís criticam este padrão, considerando-o responsável pela competição e agressão que atualmente afligem o mundo com doenças como guerras (devido à competição entre nações), degradação do meio-ambiente (devido à competição empresarial), o domínio das elites sociais e as agressões em relação às mulheres, classes sociais inferiores e minorias étnicas. Os ensinamentos bahá'ís falam da necessidade de ver o mundo de um modo diferente: como um só país, com todos os seres humanos como cidadãos daquele país e igualmente valiosos componentes dele. Mas é acima de tudo na estrutura e funcionamento da comunidade bahá'í que esta mudança de realidade

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está sendo gradualmente colocada em efeito. Poder e autoridade são retirados dos indivíduos na estrutura da comunidade bahá'í. Autoridade é investida nas instituições que são eleitas sem campanha eleitoral ou nomeação de candidatos. Decisões são tomadas com base em um processo participativo de consulta. O poder é descentralizado tanto quanto for prático e em última instância ele reside no indivíduo bahá'í, uma vez que as instituições não têm o poder de forçar a cooperação dos bahá'ís em seus planos. O objetivo dos planos que estão sendo realizados atualmente pela comunidade bahá'í é o de aumentar os recursos humanos dentro da comunidade, ao motivar cada indivíduo bahá'í a participar plenamente nos processos de estudo consultivo das escrituras, reuniões devocionais e aulas para crianças, transformando assim os indivíduos bahá'ís da passividade de serem membros de uma congregação em participação ativa na comunidade. É apenas através desta mobilização do indivíduo que o poder pode ser delegado novamente e de forma efetiva a este nível.

Palavras-chave: Fé Bahá'í; comunidade Bahá'í; cultura religiosa.

ABSTRACT

It is now well accepted by social scientists that human beings create reality socially and communally. The culture or world-view that is created is particularly stable in that it is taken for granted and is usually not therefore questioned. This paper looks at the attempts being made by the Bahá'í community throughout the world to change this socially-created reality. In particular, this paper looks at the hierarchically organized social structure that has been the norm for human beings ever since we started to live in cities. The Bahá'í teachings criticize this norm, hold it to be responsible for the competitiveness and aggression that currently afflicts the world with such ills as warfare (through national competitiveness), environmental degradation (through business competitiveness) and the social elite's domination over and aggression towards women, the lower social classes and ethnic minorities. The Bahá'í teachings speak of the need to see the world in a different way: as one country with all human beings as the citizens of that country and equally valuable components of it. But it is above all in the structure and functioning of the Bahá'í community that this change of reality is slowly being put into effect. Power and authority are taken away from individuals in the Bahá'í community structure. Authority is vested in institutions that are elected without electioneering or nomination of candidates. Decisions are taken on the basis of a participative consultation process. Power is decentralized as much as is practical and ultimately resides in the individual Bahá'í, since the

institutions have no power to coerce the cooperation of Bahá'ís in their plans. The aim of the current plans that are being effected in the Bahá'í community is to increase human resources within the community by motivating every individual Bahá'í to take a full part in the processes of consultative study of the scriptures, devotional meetings and children's classes, thus changing the individual Bahá'ís from the passivity of being a member of a congregation to active participation in the community. It is only through such mobilization of the individual that power can effectively be devolved down to that level.

Key-words: Bahá'í Faith; Bahá'í Community; Religious Culture.

Since the publication of *The social construction of reality* by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann¹ in 1967, it has become generally accepted among sociologists and scholars on culture that generations of human beings create a culture (symbols, concepts, institutions and rituals) communally and socially that later generations then treat and react to as though they were taken-for-granted and unalterable reality. This process has now been discussed exhaustively by sociologists and other academic disciplines and the field of the Sociology of Knowledge has been created. One particularly interesting aspect of this discussion has been the idea of tropes of history, as advanced by Hayden White in *Tropics of discourse*,² within the framework of which a historian writes and which then sets the pattern of what aspects of the historical data will be examined and how they will be seen. Another development in a parallel field was Thomas Kuhn's description in *The structure of scientific revolutions*³ of how scientists change from one scientific framework to another, such as the change from the Ptolemaic version of the universe to the Copernican one. This he calls the "paradigm shift". I have tried to show in my book *The phenomenon of religion*⁴ that religious conversion (a change in religious reality) parallels in many ways the changes described by Kuhn as a "paradigm shift".

1 Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The social construction of reality*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967.

2 Hayden White, *Tropics of discourse: essays in cultural criticism*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1978.

3 Thomas Kuhn, *The structure of scientific revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962.

4 Moojan Momen, *The phenomenon of religions*. Oxford: OneWorld, 1999. p. 149-53.

Academic studies on culture change have concentrated in looking at factors such as technological change, environmental factors and influences from other cultures, which produce culture change and hence a new social reality. In this paper, however, I wish to look at one aspect of this concept of the social construction of reality and the idea of a change in this reality that has not been studied much: the question of how a group can set out deliberately to change reality. The subject of this paper, the world-wide Bahá'í community has, according to its explicit texts, been setting out to do just that – to change reality, to change the way that human beings see the world. Over a hundred years ago, its founder Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892) talked about “a new world order”⁵ and interpreted the biblical prophecies of the “end of the world” and the “Day of Resurrection” as being references to the end of one religious/cultural world and the birth of a new one.⁶

There are many aspects to the ways in which Bahá'u'lláh has sought to change reality. His primary purpose, he states, was to create a new global consciousness, such that human beings would stop thinking of themselves in terms of narrow national, ethnic, religious and caste identities and think in terms of a single new global identity: “The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens.”⁷ Another change in thinking is that humanity has been used to thinking of human beings as being inherently war-like and competitive. The long-standing view that war is an inherent part of human life was reinforced by the ideas of Darwinian evolutionary theory and the struggle for survival. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá (1844-1921), the son of Bahá'u'lláh and his successor as head of the Bahá'í Faith, travelled throughout Europe and North America in the years before the First World War, warning about the consequences of this idea and urging the nations of the world to turn aside from the path towards war and adopt a new way of thinking. Whilst in London in 1911, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá is reported to have said:

5 Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983, p. 136. Most of the Bahá'í scriptural sources cited in this paper can be found on-line at: <<http://reference.bahai.org/en/>>

6 See for example Bahá'u'lláh's statement linking “the spiritual resurrection of all men” with “that which is conducive to the advancement of mankind and to the reconstruction of the world.” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978, p. 88)

7 Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 250.

During the last six thousand years nations have hated one another, it is now time to stop. War must cease. Let us be united and love one another and await the result. We know the effects of war are bad. So let us try, as an experiment, peace, and if the results of peace are bad, then we can choose if it would be better to go back to the old state of war! Let us in any case make the experiment. If we see that unity brings Light we shall continue it. For six thousand years we have been walking on the left-hand path; let us walk on the right-hand path now. We have passed many centuries in darkness, let us advance towards the light.⁸

‘Abdu’l-Bahá spoke of the need for changing our symbolic universe in order to bring about a change of reality. Concerning the meaning of words related to war and competitiveness, for example, he stated that regarding the word “victory”, for the Bahá’í Cause: “its victory is to submit and yield”⁹ and quotes Bahá’u’lláh as stating:

Therefore, today, “victory” neither hath been, nor will be opposition to anyone, nor strife with any person; but rather what is well-pleasing-this is, that the cities of men’s hearts, which are under the dominion of the hosts of selfishness and lust, should be subdued by the sword of the Word of Wisdom, and of Exhortation.¹⁰

Similarly, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá subverts the concept of competition from its usual role in a competitive society, that of gaining power, and instead promotes it as an approach in the arena of service: “Vie ye with each other in the service of God and of His Cause. This is indeed what profiteth you in this world, and in that which is to come.”¹¹ The goal of personal ambition and the source of greatest glory do not belong, in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s estimation,

8 *Abdu’l-Bahá in London*. London: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1987. p. 61-2.

9 Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Haifa: Bahá’í World Centre, p. 256.

10 Bahá’u’lláh quoted by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in *A traveller’s narrative*, trans: E.G. Browne. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1891. v. 2, p. 114.

11 Quoted by Shoghi Effendi in *Advent of divine justice*. Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1990, p. 83.

to the person who seizes power and exerts control, but to the person who excels in service to “human uplift and betterment”¹² and to “the cause of the Most Great Peace.”¹³

Hierarchical social structures as reality

There are many aspects to the changes in social reality that the Bahá'í teachings are trying to bring about. In order to bring this paper down to a manageable length, however, we will concentrate on one particular practical area: the changes in social structure and power relationships that the Bahá'í community is trying to institute. This area has the advantage that we are able to look not only at the scriptures of the Bahá'í Faith but also at the practical steps that Bahá'í communities are taking at the local level.

For about five thousand years, human beings have been living in cities.¹⁴ This move from living in small widely dispersed communities to a situation where large numbers are confined within the protective walls of a city produced a profound change in human affairs – in human social structures and humanity's consciousness. Indeed the profundity of this change is embedded in language itself. The word “civilization” and all that it connotes of human advancement and culture comes from the Latin root *civis*, meaning “city”, while the word “politics” and all that it connotes of ordering society stems from the Greek word *polis*, also meaning “city”. The main effect that it had on human society was to move human society from a comparatively flat social structure with much consultation among society's elders (which still exists today in some primal societies¹⁵) to a much more steeply pyramidal, more authoritarian structure with usually a single person

12 *Promulgation of universal peace*. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982, p. 353.

13 *Promulgation of universal peace*, p. 123.

14 Tertius Chandler *Four thousand years of urban growth: an historical census*. Lewiston, NY: St. David's University Press, 1987. Despite the title of the book, Chandler's survey starts with cities from 3100 BCE.

15 Christopher Boehm, *Hierarchy in the forest: the evolution of egalitarian behavior*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999.

(or a small clique) at the head of the pyramid and the masses having little say in social decision-making. This pyramidal structure occurs not just in the political structure but also in business and industry, in religion, in most voluntary associations and even in most families. At the head of the social pyramid, in Europe and the Americas, are a few white middle-class or upper class men. Supporting them are the remaining middle class and upper class white men. This small group of people maintains a hegemonic leadership over the base of the pyramid, which is composed of everyone else. Indeed if one considers that half of society is women and then adds in the various ethnic and class groups, one can see that in Western societies, where everyone is supposed to be equal, it is only a small percentage who are at the top of the social hierarchy and who have full access to the benefits and opportunities, while the majority are a good deal less “equal” than them.

It had been over a hundred years now that people have been criticising and acknowledging the faults of the hegemonic pyramidal nature of human society.¹⁶ This criticism has become more vocal in recent years, as people identify more and more of the disadvantages that accrue from the hierarchical structure, especially as the attitudes and values of it feed out from the central political structures to the corporate world and even into the family. Feminists have attributed the patriarchal society (a society in which men rule) in which we live to its highly-competitive, pyramidal structure (women are by nature less competitive and therefore will always do worse in a highly competitive environment; they do much better in co-operative, caring environments¹⁷) and have also blamed it for the attitudes that result in domestic violence and violence against women in general.¹⁸ Similarly, environmentalists and anti-globalization protestors have identified the highly competitive nature of industry as a leading cause of pollution and poor corporate social practices (such as relocating jobs to places where employment

16 These criticisms have classically varied from Karl Marx's criticisms of the hierarchical class structure, Antonio Gramsci's criticism of the cultural hegemony that maintains capitalist societies – see note 19.

17 Carol Gilligan, *In a different voice: psychological theory and women's development*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1982; Carol Gilligan, N. Lyons and T. Hanmer, *Making connections: the relational worlds of adolescent girls at Emma Willard School*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1990.

18 See for example Marilyn French, *Beyond power: on women, men and morals*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1985.

costs and environmental standards are lower without regard for the social consequences).¹⁹

It is easier, however, to criticise hierarchical societies than to do anything to change them. There have been a number of attempts to change this pyramidal structure of society for a more equalitarian flatter one. Democracy was intended to produce this result and, while it may have had some success, the structure that is common in many democratic societies is that of a powerful presidential figure and a small elite who hold all the power for a fixed number of years. In other words, the pyramidal structure remains; it is just that the people at the top may change every few years. The French Revolution and the various Communist Revolutions that have occurred have all been in the name of creating a more egalitarian society. They too failed, having succeeded only in replacing one group at the top of the pyramid with another group.

The hierarchical or hegemonic society is very stable and difficult to change for three reasons. The first reason is that this hierarchical picture of the world is seen as the taken-for-granted reality, the unalterable norm for human society.²⁰ Those who claim otherwise, who say that it is possible to create a non-hierarchical society based on co-operation, are seen as woolly-minded dreamers who are ignoring the harsh facts of life. The second reason is that in a society where power and might prevail, the only way that a new philosophy or movement can replace the old is to gain power and to use that to introduce the new view. Thus, if one's aim is to produce a society that is less based on power and competitiveness, the only way of getting this view noticed is to compromise on the view itself. Those that led the French or the various Communist Revolutions in the name of a more egalitarian society were however forced to seize power and in doing so found their initial values subverted. The result was a society that was just as hierarchical as before, but with merely a different set of people in power. George Orwell's *Animal*

19 Tom Jones and Richard McNally, Pollution for export? *UNESCO Courier*, December 1998, p. 10-13. For the general case against competitiveness, see A. Kohn, *No contest: the case against competition*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1986.

20 Antonio Gramsci developed the idea of the hegemonic leadership of the dominant group in his Prison Notebooks; see Dominic Strinati, *An introduction to theories of popular culture*. Routledge, London, 1995. See especially p. 165-9.

*farm*²¹ brilliantly describes this process. The values of power and competitiveness are thus subversive of anyone who tries to overthrow them.²² A further reason that makes it difficult to achieve any change is that in patriarchal societies, it is very difficult to even gain an acknowledgement of the fact that a problem exists. It is men from the dominant group who control the communications media and the education system; it is they who are the journalists, the newspaper editors, the social analysts, the professors of social sciences and these men experience no barriers and therefore see no problem. Such men will often assert that there are no barriers in their society because they experience none – and therefore there is no need for any change. The rhetoric coming from these leaders of society is that their societies are fair and democratic with equal opportunities for all. It is the women who experience the “glass ceiling” in their careers; it is the ethnic minorities who are automatically given the low-grade and low-paying jobs with no possibility of advancement. But the voices of these are not heard; their complaint of inequality is not acknowledged and the fiction of a fair and free society continues.²³

The Bahá'í teachings on equality and globalisation

The Bahá'í teachings, as has already been indicated above, aim to create a new global consciousness among human beings. Human beings need to transcend their narrow partisan identities that have been the basis of hatred, conflict and war. The world in which we are living is already unified in terms of communications, travel, finance, trade and knowledge and even the diversity of cultures, languages and belief systems that exist are becoming

21 Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968; originally published 1944.

22 Christopher Boehm, Egalitarian behavior and reverse dominance hierarchy, *Current Anthropology*, v. 34/3, (June 1993). p. 227-254. This argument is also made in Marilyn French, *Beyond Power*.

23 Augusto Lopez-Claros and Saadia Zahidi, *Women's empowerment: measuring the global gender gap*. Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2005. This disadvantaging of women occurs even in developed economies, see *National Statistics Office, social focus on women and men*. London: The Stationery Office, 1998.

increasingly available to all. This is the physical reality that already exists. The Bahá'í position is that human thinking needs to come into line with it.²⁴

Bahá'ís consider that human beings need to think in terms of the unity of all humanity. Rather than conceptualising society as an army with a general at its head, we need to switch to thinking of human society in organic terms. Just as the head, the heart, the skin and even the bones have an important part to play in the human body and each is dependent on the other, human beings must learn that all elements in this global society are interdependent and therefore equally important.

It is obvious that all created things are connected one to another by a linkage complete and perfect, even, for example, as are the members of the human body. Note how all the members and component parts of the human body are connected one to another. In the same way, all the members of this endless universe are linked one to another. The foot and the step, for example, are connected to the ear and the eye; the eye must look ahead before the step is taken. The ear must hear before the eye will carefully observe. And whatever member of the human body is deficient, produceth a deficiency in the other members. The brain is connected with the heart and stomach, the lungs are connected with all the members. So is it with the other members of the body.²⁵

Changing reality: the structure of the Bahá'í community

Many writers have, however, written persuasively about the equality of human beings and about the need for more egalitarian societies.²⁶ As

24 Bahá'í International Community, *The prosperity of humankind*. New York: Bahá'í International Community United Nations Office, 1995. p. 6-8. Available on-line at: <<http://www.bic-un.bahai.org/95-0303.htm>>

25 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 47.

26 Liberty and Equality were the aims of the French Revolution. The classless society and full human freedom would of course, according to the vision of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, be the result of the Communist Revolution.

pointed out above, however, most of these have produced no practical plan for bringing this about. And where there has been a plan of action, such as with the Communist Manifesto, it has failed to produce its intended effect. It is indeed hard to change reality, especially those parts of reality that are as deeply embedded as are hierarchical social structures.

The interesting aspect of the Bahá'í community is that it claims to have a plan for the creation of an alternative vision of the world and its present activities are designed to gradually put this plan into effect. Some of the features of the Bahá'í administrative structure and its functioning will now be described to demonstrate how it is creating a new social reality. Such a survey is necessarily brief and readers are referred to more detailed descriptions of the Bahá'í Faith for more information.²⁷

The basic structure of the Bahá'í administrative order looks superficially similar to other democratic systems of governance. It has elected councils at local, national and international levels which administer the affairs of the Bahá'ís. When one looks in detail at this system, however, one finds many unusual features, most of which relate specifically to the idea that authority in the Bahá'í community is not vested in individuals but in the elected bodies themselves. There are no priests, prophets or learned classes in the Bahá'í community. The individual members of the elected councils have no authority of their own. If, for example, a member of the national elected council lives in a particular town, he or she has no individual authority by virtue of being on the national council and is under the authority of the local elected council in that town. It is only the elected council as a body taking decisions that has authority in the Bahá'í community. Thus power and authority are taken away from individuals.

One of the most important provisions in the Bahá'í scriptures is the concept of the Covenant. According to this doctrine, although all Bahá'ís have the right and indeed the duty to study the scriptures for themselves, they do not have the right to say that their understanding is the correct understanding or is authoritative. Only the interpretations of the Bahá'í scriptures by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the son and successor of Bahá'u'lláh, and that

27 See for example, Wendi Momen, *Understanding the Baha'i Faith*. Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic Press, 2006, for a general outline. More references regarding specific points are given with the relevant paragraphs below.

of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's grandson and successor Shoghi Effendi (1897-1957) are authoritative. The interpretations of all other Bahá'ís have an equal non-binding and non-authoritative standing in the community. This again is intended to prevent the emergence of hierarchies based on knowledge and power, the creation of factions and sects around the viewpoints of learned or charismatic figures.²⁸

One of the features of the Bahá'í administrative structure designed to prevent the emergence of hierarchical social structures is the Bahá'í electoral system, which is in many ways the opposite of the highly competitive and power-driven Western party system. The creation of political parties, party platforms, manifestoes and indeed all nominations and electioneering are prohibited in Bahá'í elections. The duty of the electors in a Bahá'í election is to consider and reflect carefully on the qualities of all of the Bahá'ís whom they know and who are eligible for election and then to choose the nine persons who are best suited to the task of administering the Bahá'í community.²⁹ One aspect of the functioning of the Bahá'í community that is unusual by the standards of Western elections is that once elected, the members of these councils are not answerable to their electorates. They do not therefore need to respond to the passing whims of the masses who tend to over-react to every passing event and are easily manipulated by newspapers and television. They are only answerable to God and their own consciences for their decisions.³⁰

Another feature of the Bahá'í administration, which – it is claimed – helps in the breaking down of hierarchical structures, is the principle of subsidiarity. In most government systems, unless there are strong safeguards, power tends to accumulate at the top and be removed from the lower tiers of

28 Moojan Momen, *The Bahá'í Faith: a short introduction*. Oxford: OneWorld, 1997. p. 77-78.

29 See compilation from authoritative Bahá'í texts: the spiritual character of Bahá'í elections, *Compilation of Compilations*, prepared by the Universal House of Justice 1963-1990. 2 v. [Sydney]: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 1991. v. 1, p. 315-18.

30 Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, rev. edn. 1974. p. 332.

government.³¹ In the Bahá'í administration, however, there is a clear mandate that whatever decisions can be made at the local level should be made by the local elected councils and only those that have ramifications beyond the local or which need to be co-ordinated at the national level should be taken at that level, and so forth. There is a principle that authority should be decentralized as far as possible.³² Thus for example, in the early stages of the development of the Bahá'í Faith, the administration of the Bahá'í world and the making of plans for its expansion was done centrally in Haifa by Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice, the international elected council that is the supreme authority in the Bahá'í world at the present time. Detailed plans were then sent to the various national communities for them to carry out. As the various national elected bodies of the Bahá'í world matured, the Universal House of Justice increasingly devolved upon them the authority to make their own plans and carry these out.³³

One can even see the Bahá'í refusal to take part in party politics as an expression of its determination to create a new social reality.³⁴ We have already seen that the hierarchical society cannot be overturned by participating in its processes. Those who have taken this approach have ended by compromising their values and perpetuating hierarchical social structures and the associated values of power and competitiveness. Thus the Bahá'í refusal to participate in party politics is entirely logical and an inherent part of its strategy for changing society. Participation in party politics would result not only in disunity among the Bahá'ís but would compromise the very values upon which the Bahá'ís are trying to build their new reality.

31 See for example the centralization of power and the concept of "control" in L. Anderson, *Organizational theory and the study of state and local parties*, in W. J. Crotty (ed.), *Approaches to the study of party organization*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1968. p. 375- 403. As an example of this process, see the removal from local control of the police by national government in Chris A. William, "Britain's police forces: forever removed from democratic control?" *History and Policy*, policy paper 16, viewed at: <<http://www.historyandpolicy.org/archive/policy-paper-16.html>> (on 18 February 2006)

32 Bahá'í International Community, *Turning Point for All Nations*, New York, 1995, p. 7 (can be viewed on-line at: <<http://statements.bahai.org/pdf/95-1001.pdf>>). Moojan Momen, *The Bahá'í Faith: a short introduction*, Oxford: OneWorld, 1997, p. 80-81.

33 Peter Smith and Moojan Momen, *The Bahá'í Faith 1957-1988: a survey of contemporary developments*, *Religion*, v. 19 (1989), p. 63-91, see p. 73-5.

34 *Directives from the Guardian* (compiled by Gertrude Garrida), New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1973. p. 55-7.

The functioning of the community as a means of changing reality

Within the Bahá'í community, there are aspects of its functioning which are themselves tools for changing reality. When laying down plans for the expansion of the Bahá'í community, Shoghi Effendi, the second successor to Bahá'u'lláh, deliberately urged the Bahá'ís to seek out every tribal group, minority ethnic group and social group and to try to bring these into the Bahá'í community.³⁵ In this way, he brought into a concrete visualised reality Bahá'u'lláh's concept of the unity and interconnectedness of all humanity. By bringing together widely diverse cultures and peoples and resolving the inevitable clashes and problems that arise in an ambit of unity, prayer and love, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi assisted the Bahá'ís to overcome the hatreds and prejudices that are an inherent part of all human cultures.

A very important part of the functioning of the Bahá'í community is the mechanism of consultation.³⁶ All decision-making on the elected councils and their committees is through this process, but 'Abdul-Bahá encourages its use in other situations also and Bahá'ís use it in making personal or family decisions, in the work-place, in studying the scripture in groups, in all situations where truth and guidance are sought. The rules of Bahá'í consultation are that it should be carried out in a prayerful and considered way; that the opinions of all present should be sought and treated respectfully; that once an opinion is put forward, it should be detached from its presenter and discussed without reference to personalities; that the facts should be ascertained first, before discussion of possible solutions is started. The qualities of Bahá'í consultation are described by 'Abdu'l-Bahá as being:

35 During the successive international plans of the Bahá'í world community, increasing the diversity of the Bahá'í community was a prominent oart of the goals and achievements. See for example the list of tribes and ethnic groups represented in the Bahá'í Faith in *The Bahá'í Faith 1844-1963: information statistical and comparative*. Haifa: Hands of the Cause Residing in the Holy Land, [1963], p. 15-20; and the statement in *The seven year plan, 1979-1986: statistical report*. Haifa: Universal House of Justice, 1986. p. 61-64.

36 See John E. Kolstoe, *Consultation: a universal lamp of guidance*. Oxford: George Ronald, 1985.

The prime requisites for them that take counsel together are purity of motive, radiance of spirit, detachment from all else save God, attraction to His Divine Fragrances, humility and lowliness amongst His loved ones, patience and long-suffering in difficulties and servitude to His exalted Threshold.³⁷

The Bahá'í process of consultation is thus one which encourages all those taking part to participate. This helps to draw out women, members of minority groups and races as well as lower social classes who do not feel confident enough to speak in group settings. The Bahá'í ideal of consultation provides a safe and encouraging environment for such people to express their views. Indeed, just as men are better at competition, women are inherently better in the co-operative environment produced by the consultation process.³⁸ In such an environment, they therefore feel comfortable in putting forward their views (which is not the case in a highly competitive environment) and they are able to play a major role in Bahá'í community life. Thus the process of consultation breaks down the domination of social processes by the dominant elements in society, which, in Europe and most of the Americas, tend to be white, middle class and upper class men.

Changing the reality of power and authority

Another interesting aspect of the Bahá'í community arises from an attempt to separate power and authority. In the present world, power and authority are assumed to be inextricably linked. It is assumed that in a well-run and well-ordered society, it is necessary that whichever individuals are given authority should automatically receive the power with which to enforce that authority. It is assumed that if power does not accompany authority, disorder will arise because the institution having authority will lack the power to carry out its orders. In the Bahá'í community, the ethos is entirely different.

³⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, n. 43, p. 87.

³⁸ See note 16.

There is an attempt to separate authority and power to some extent. We have noted above that individuals have neither authority nor power in the Bahá'í community. The elected institutions of the Bahá'í community have the authority to direct the affairs of the community, but their obligation is to try to achieve their objectives through winning the support of the generality of the Bahá'í community. Shoghi Effendi, addressing primarily the members of the elected Bahá'í institutions, states:

Let us also bear in mind that the keynote of the Cause of God is not dictatorial authority but humble fellowship, not arbitrary power, but the spirit of frank and loving consultation. Nothing short of the spirit of a true Bahá'í can hope to reconcile the principles of mercy and justice, of freedom and submission, of the sanctity of the right of the individual and of self-surrender, of vigilance, discretion and prudence on the one hand, and fellowship, candour, and courage on the other.³⁹

The elected Bahá'í institutions have in effect very little power to enforce their authority in many areas when compared with the central authorities of other religions. They have no doctrinal authority; no authority to determine correct doctrine or to create new doctrine or theological teachings, nor to interpret the texts of the scripture. Thus they hold no power in many areas over which religious leadership has traditionally held both power and authority. They have the authority to direct the Bahá'í community by laying out plans of action for the Bahá'ís, but they have no sanctions or other means of compelling the Bahá'ís to carry out these plans. If Bahá'ís, for example, want to completely ignore the present Five Year Plan of the Universal House of Justice, they are free to do so without any fear of sanctions against them. The general situation is summed up in the words of the Universal House of Justice thus:

39 Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í administration*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1968. p. 63-64.

Authority and direction flow from the Assemblies, whereas the power to accomplish the tasks resides primarily in the entire body of the believers.⁴⁰

The power that the elected institutions have over the Bahá'ís can only be exercised in extreme situations and is thus rarely encountered by the average Bahá'í. This power involves Bahá'ís whose actions go outside certain limits. These include for example administrative sanctions against Bahá'ís who are public about their disregard for the Bahá'í moral code: for example by being intoxicated in public or publically and flagrantly breaking Bahá'í sexual morality (note that what Bahá'ís do privately is not a cause of action by the Bahá'í institutions). More severe sanctions are taken towards those who seek to create division and sectarianism in the Bahá'í community (note that holding differing opinions is not sanctionable, it is only when an individual attempts to create a sect or grouping around such an opinion that sanctions may be applied). The overwhelming majority of Bahá'ís will not however experience this.

It may even be said that leadership, whether from the individuals who succeeded Bahá'u'lláh as leaders of the Bahá'í community, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, or the administrative institutions which now administer the community, is seen not as the instrument of power and authority but rather as an opportunity for service. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's name means "The servant of Bahá' [u'lláh]". He wrote:

My name is Abdu'l-Bahá. My qualification is Abdu'l-Bahá. My reality is Abdu'l-Bahá. My praise is Abdu'l-Bahá. Thralldom to the Blessed Perfection is my glorious and refulgent diadem, and servitude to all the human race my perpetual religion (...) No name, no title, no mention, no commendation have I, nor will ever have, except Abdu'l-Bahá. This is my longing. This is my greatest yearning. This is my eternal life. This is my everlasting glory."⁴¹

40 From a letter of the Universal House of Justice to Continental Boards of Counsellors and National Spiritual Assemblies, October 1, 1969, in *The Continental Boards of Counsellors*, Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1981. p. 37-38. See also words of Shoghi Effendi in *Citadel of Faith: messages to America 1947-1957*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1965. p. 130-31.

41 Quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *The world order of Bahá'u'lláh*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991. p. 139.

Shoghi Effendi signed his letters in English “Your true brother, Shoghi” and regarded his station as that of servitude to the Master [‘Abdu’l-Bahá]:

May I also express my heartfelt desire that the friends of God in every land regard me in no other light but that of a true brother, united with them in our common servitude to the Master’s Sacred Threshold, and refer to me in their letters and verbal addresses always as Shoghi Effendi, for I desire to be known by no other name save the one our Beloved Master was wont to utter, a name which of all other designations is the most conducive to my spiritual growth and advancement.⁴²

The spirit animating the elected institutions of the Bahá’í community should also be, as the quotation cited above states, that of “humble fellowship” and “frank and loving consultation”. And the qualities that those who engage in consultation should strive for include, as described above: “purity of motive,(...) detachment from all else save God,(...) humility and lowliness amongst His loved ones,(...) servitude to His exalted Threshold”; all qualities that are the exact opposite of those normally associated with positions of power and authority. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has stated, regarding the members of these elected institutions:

Now they (the members) must, in perfect spirit and fragrance, in sincerity of heart, in attraction by the fragrances of God and by the confirmations of the Holy Spirit, engage in service; in the promotion of the Word of God; the diffusion of the fragrances of God; the training of souls; the promulgation of the Most Great Peace.⁴³

This can be visualised by saying that whereas the current model of social structure is that of a pyramid of power and authority, the model in the Bahá’í community is an inverse pyramid with the ordinary Bahá’ís at the

42 Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá’í administration*, p. 25.

43 *Bahá’í world Faith*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 2 ed. 1976. p. 403.

top, holding the power to carry forward the religion, and the institutions, who hold authority, below them, serving the ordinary Bahá'ís.⁴⁴

Conclusion: the pathway to changing reality

As indicated above, the Bahá'ís are doing many things in moving towards a change of reality. They are building up a non-hierarchical administrative system where individuals do not have either power or authority; their consultative decision-making processes encourage those who often feel most oppressed and alienated in modern society to express themselves and participate in social action; they have established institutions that aim to serve rather than to exert power and authority; their aim is a new global consciousness of human unity.

Moving human beings from one reality to another is inevitably a slow and painstaking process. Human beings are comfortable in their current reality and an effort is needed to change it. Just because a human being accepts the intellectual argument that a change of reality is needed does not mean that patterns of behaviour that are deeply ingrained in the culture can be discarded overnight. Progress is invariably slow and must be taken in small steps each building on the one before.

The Bahá'í community is currently engaged in a Five Year Plan as a stage in its development. The goals of this plan are closely aligned with the breaking down of old patterns of thought associated with the old hierarchical social reality and creating new patterns of behaviour and thought aligned with the new social reality. In its writings, the Universal House of Justice has written of “a change in the culture of the [Bahá'í] community”.⁴⁵ The old reality that the Universal House of Justice has stated it is seeking to free the Bahá'í community from is one which is dominated by

⁴⁴ I am grateful to Dr Wendi Momen for this suggestion.

⁴⁵ Ridván message of the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'í world, Ridván 2000; can be viewed on line at: <<http://bahai-library.com/published.uhj/ridvan/2000.html>>

the mode of religious activity that characterizes the general society – in which the believer is a member of a congregation, leadership comes from an individual or individuals presumed to be qualified for the purpose, and personal participation is fitted into a schedule dominated by concerns of a very different nature.⁴⁶

The passivity implied in being a “member of a congregation” is that of the masses who are not used to taking the initiative, who are not used to being consulted and who are used to waiting for instructions to come from high. The new social reality cannot come about unless the individuals who form part of it are transformed and are fully taking part in the new culture. Through the establishment of training institutes and the participation of every Bahá'í in programmes aimed at inducing reflective thought and encouraging participative consultation, the whole of the Bahá'í community (which up to this point has had the general features of a congregation) is being stimulated to arise to the sort of level of individual initiative, group consultation and participative action that will enable the vision of a new reality to take concrete form. The overall aim is to increase the human resources in the Bahá'í community and to have universal participation in programmes of social action which have arisen out of consultative processes. In these ways, Bahá'ís believe that a new social reality is slowly but steadily emerging within the Bahá'í community and the Universal House of Justice has already spoken of presenting the Bahá'í community as a model for how the global unity advocated by Bahá'u'lláh over one hundred years ago can be achieved.⁴⁷

46 Letter of the Universal House of Justice to an individual, dated 22 August 2002; can be viewed on-line at: <<http://bahai-library.com/uhj/enrollments.growth.html>>

47 Universal House of Justice, *The promise of world peace*. Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1985. p. 24-25.